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CHAFEE SMART-GROWTH BILL APPROVED BY SENATE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Community Character Act Would Help Communities Plan for Development

WASHINGTON, DC – The U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee today approved legislation authored by Senator Lincoln Chafee – the Community Character Act – designed to assist local communities deal with development booms.

The bill – which was approved by a vote of 12 to 7 – would provide \$25 million in voluntary federal grants each year to help local states and communities develop or revise land use planning legislation, and to conduct research and development related to land use plans. The bill is designed to allow financially strapped states, cities and towns pay for the planning expertise they need to adequately protect their communities from haphazard growth.

“I introduced the Community Character Act for one very simple purpose: to provide limited federal assistance to those states and tribes that want to organize their growth,” Chafee said. “To do this, the bill provides federal assistance to individual states to create or update local land use planning legislation. Up-to-date planning legislation empowers states and local governments to spur economic development, protect the environment, coordinate transportation and infrastructure needs, and preserve our communities.”

Chafee continued. “As a former mayor, I agree that land use decisions should be made at the state and local levels. I would not want the federal government to tell me what was best for the City of Warwick. The Community Character Act was drafted with this point in mind.”

The Problem: Unplanned Development

Cities and towns across America are facing a difficult choice between explosive development and the preservation of community character. Since 1990, the rates of population growth in some communities across America have been staggering: Las Vegas 83%, Naples, Florida 65%, Austin, Texas 48%, Boise, Idaho 46%, Phoenix 45%, Provo, Utah 40%, Atlanta 39%, Wilmington, N.C. 36%, and Denver 30%.

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When a development boom hits a community, local planning departments are often overwhelmed, citizens are caught unawares, and the community's character is undermined before residents have a chance to be heard. Adequate planning requires funding to hire expertise in such areas as traffic engineering, landscape design, architecture, and historic preservation. Without this assistance, communities are often incapable of negotiating wise land use decisions with the petitioners.

The Community Character Act

The Community Character Act would provide much needed funding to state, local and tribal governments to help them handle future growth demands while preserving the economic, natural, cultural, and historic resources of our communities. Specifically, the bill would create a program under the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) to provide grants to assist state and tribal governments with land use planning activities that promote public goods such as environmental protection, public works infrastructure, and sustainable economic development.

The bill provides \$25 million each year for fiscal years 2002-2006 and caps grants at \$1 million. The legislation also authorizes the EDA to provide up to \$1 million per year in additional voluntary educational and informational programming.

The Community Character Act is specifically written to ensure local - not federal - control of land use decisions. The bill is designed to provide individual states with the necessary means to balance the competing needs of development and preservation.

The bill does not require any state or local government to do any planning if they decide it is unnecessary. Instead, it provides critical funding to states and local governments that find themselves under siege by unexpected development and want to update local planning laws, but might otherwise lack the means to do so.

The Community Character Act has received the support of a variety of groups, including the National Association of Realtors, the National Multi Housing Council, the National Apartment Association, the Trust for Public Land, the American Planning Association, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and the American Society of Landscape Architects.

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